

## **‘K’ IS FOR . . .**

### **SØREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855)**

Søren Kierkegaard (or ‘SK’ to follow the customary abbreviation used by many of his interpreters and biographers), Danish writer in poetic forms, philosophy, psychology, and Christian devotion, has been called the father of existentialism.

**MORALIZED TIME LINE.** We can well imagine that, in his youth-span, SK experienced conscience activity at turns heightened and suppressed. Notably heightened activity would likely have occurred: during his struggle with the revelation of his origin that accompanied his father’s confession of infidelity and in the course of successive losses --his mother as well as five siblings—before the end of his adolescence. There was repudiation of his strict religious upbringing, then demoralization and suppression of conscience activity during his resort to desperate hedonism in young adulthood. A matter of conscience, too, was his love for Regina Olsen and the deliberations that eventuated in breaking his engagement with her. His JOURNALS are indicative of persistent bouts of depression in life sometimes with deliberations on suicidality. As late as 1848 he writes, progressing from past to present tense:

It is terrible when I think, even for a single moment, over the dark background which, from the very earliest time, was part of my life. The dread with which my father filled my soul, his own frightful melancholy, and all the things in this connection which I do not even note down. I felt dread of Christianity and yet myself so strongly drawn towards it.... (JOURNALS, p. 149)

Accordingly, his leap of faith and acceptance of the Christian call to love must be regarded as the matter of conscience ultimately most crucial to him. Subsequently, we find conscience in his decisions and renewed vows to devote himself to writing and publishing and again in his activist undertaking of a sustained polemic that he would consolidate in his work, ATTACK UPON “CHRISTENDOM”. The attack earned him personal ridicule and estrangement from the established Danish Church.

**CONSCIENCE RELEVANT WORKS.** SK wrote his JOURNALS and Christian Reflections and Discourses in his own name but adopted pseudonyms for his poetical, psychological and philosophical works. In his JOURNALS, SK indicates that his intent is to underscore that with each pseudonym, he is taking a certain point of view or perspective, offering both the advantages and disadvantages of a limited scope. In EITHER/OR (EO), for example, the author contrasts the aesthetic and the putatively moral views of life. The reader should not be deceived into thinking that a particular pseudonym represents what SK declares to be his final point of view, found in his Christian Reflections and Discourses, preeminently, WORKS OF LOVE (WL). SK’s device of having pseudonyms characterize positions and perspectives demands an inter-textual approach drawing from contributions over his own signature. The close reader heeding the demand is ‘rewarded’ –so to speak –with a disorienting and disturbing display of moral imagination. The reader will be tasked with deep engagement in his or her own moral imagination, as well.

**CONSCIENCE STAGES.** In STAGES ON LIFE’S WAY the author identifies aesthetic, moral and religious stages of lived experience. For each stage the author identifies an exemplar: Don Juan, Socrates and Abraham, respectively. He raises Socrates as an exemplar of the ethical and, probably also, what one pseudonym terms, of *Religiousness A*. Abraham is certainly identified and esteemed as the father of faith.

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**CONSCIENCE DOMAINS.** To better approximate SK's conceptualization of conscience, we must first of all discern what SK believes conscience is not. This inevitably draws us into SK's often polemical reaction to the philosophy of Hegel. In Hegel's speculative system the higher ethical life is mediated from opposing factors: the subjective will of the conscientious individual, on the one hand and objective norms, on the other. Hegel calls both of these *abstract*. In Hegel's system, they belong to the intermediate sphere of morality (*Moralität*) a transitional moment in dialectical movement to higher ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), which Hegel calls *concrete universal* or absolute (Collins, 1967).

**Conceptualization of Conscience:** While SK deliberately intends the pseudonymous author of FEAR AND TREMBLING (FT), Johannes *de silentio* **not** provide *direct communication* on the uniquely Christian positions that SK will make explicit in WL, Johannes nonetheless take an anti-Hegelian position that captures SK's view of an intimate relationship between religious faith in general and conscience, each only to be understood, not as concrete universal or absolute but rather as passionate features of human subjectivity embedded in the particular individual.

**Moralized Attachment:** While religious-moral choosing (via *the leap of faith*) is pre-eminent in SK's poetical, psychological and philosophical works, he emphasizes the unmet demands of moralized connectedness in the reflective Christian discourse WL. Every relationship including marriage (the possibility of which SK rejected on his life's way) occurs in a tri-personal field involving God as well as human beings who are commanded to love one another. On SK's view, the God relationship has priority over erotic or any other form of love by secular description.

**Moral Emotional Responsiveness:** Familiar moral-emotionally charged words are abundant in SK's writings and are featured in the titles of the poetical work FT and the psychological work THE CONCEPT OF DREAD. However terms of discrete emotion and mood are eclipsed by his use of the dispositional term, passion. After all is said and done, in SK's view, conscience subserves faith but shares with faith the characteristic of being *passionate inwardness*. Moral emotional responsiveness is not a neat cognitive process; it entails *a pure heart*. In WL, there is a sustained reflection (WL IIIB) entitled "Love Is a Matter of Conscience" which expands upon I Timothy 1:5: "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith." We encounter a continuous dynamic of reparation and healing, in the forms of confession, penitence, indebtedness and forgiveness (Hall, 2002).

**Moral Valuation:** The moral stage as depicted in EO and SWL is fairly consonant with Kant's deontological ethics and the idea of the categorical imperative, but SK insists that, in Christ, ethics are transformed into a constant striving (*immer strebend*) to love God and neighbor that, as Theologian and Ethicist Amy Laura Hall puts it, "undermine a description of duty met." Keeping in mind that SK embeds conscience in particular subjectivity, conscience can be understood to work by illuminating and convicting with respect to immediate vicious impulses (e.g., those of the aesthete and The Seducer in EO) but also the guises of self-deception (e.g., those of Judge William in EO). Conscience, properly functioning, repetitively applies a kind of **VALUE MATRIX** that undermines any confidence we may have that we ever fulfill "our duty to be in the debt of love to each another" and that we ever achieve, let alone sustain, relationships with others according to God's requirement. Removing self-deceptions, conscience readies the individual to stand alone before God, in the recognition of inevitable sin, in humility, willing to remain in infinite debt to the one who pays for sin.

**Tolerance:** SK deliberates seriously up on what he calls *paganism*. SK's occasional remarks on perceptions attributed to persons outside Christianity regarding the folly, blasphemy, offense, scandal, stumbling block etc. of the Absolute Paradox of Christianity might be construed to reveal keen sensitivity to, and even sympathy with, non-Christian religious- moral perspectives on the demands of Christian

love, but he has no tolerance for attempts in philosophy to treat religious faith as a moment to be *sublated* in a dialectical system.

Justice: While SK recognizes social injustice, on his view Christianity never seeks to make changes in externals, "...has not wanted to hurl governments from the throne in order to set itself on the throne; in an external sense it has never striven for a place in the world, for it is not of this world (for in the heart room, if it finds a place there, it still takes no position in the world)." (WL, p. 137)—seemingly a repudiation of any tendencies in his time towards what would now be called radical or liberation Christology. Something of SK's awareness of the violation of women's rights, however, can be discerned. "What abominations has the world not seen in the relationship between man and woman—that she, almost like an animal, was a despised creature compared to the male, a creature of another species! What battles there have been to establish women on equal terms with men in the secular world!" (WL, p. 139) SK (as distinguished from his character Judge William who abhors emancipation of women) does not appear to be absolutely opposed to redress by secular reforms, but his Christian view is that men and women are equal in what ultimately concerns them, that is their relationship to God. "Foolish men have foolishly busied themselves in the name of Christianity to make it obvious to the world that women have equal rights with men—Christianity has never demanded or desired this. It has done everything for woman if she Christianly will be satisfied with being Christian. If she will not, for her loss she gains only a mediocre compensation in the little fragmentary externals she can win by worldly threats." (WL, p. 140)

#### **Moralized Autonomy/Volition:**

Ideally speaking it may be perfectly true that every man should be given freedom of conscience and freedom of belief, etc.... Now everyone wants to do away with all constraint, so as to play the apostle—which is like doing away with cannon, powder, and bayonet and then wanting to be a very brave soldier. In order that it be *conscience* alone that decides...it is necessary to have opposition and constraint. The qualification "conscience" is so inward that it requires the very finest filters in order to discover it....The man who can really stand alone in the world, only taking counsel from his conscience—that man is a hero...." [JOURNALS (in Bretall, pp 428-429)].

In FT, SK approaches the incomprehensibility of faith's demand upon conscience. He does this by visiting and revisiting the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, a motif powerful, shocking and subject to conflicting interpretations, and, perhaps, defying any (merely human) interpretation at all. Loving father and beloved son are instructed by God to ready themselves for a sacrifice. Only Abraham knows that God has further instructed him that his son will be the one sacrificed. To describe this experience and impress upon his reader Abraham's suffering over this divine command and his love for Isaac, SK coins the phrase "religious horror".

Demoralization and harm prevention: Especially in SICKNESS UNTO DEATH, we are able to infer that SK counteracted suicidality by retrieval of his life affirming religious values. SK would have attributed to God's Grace, rather than to any efforts of his own, the turnarounds that must have occurred repeatedly for him to survive his self-destructive urges and melancholy dispositions.

However, he completed the 1848 **JOURNAL** entry cited above this way: "How true are the words I have so often said to myself, that as Scheherazade saved her life by telling fairy-stories I save my life, or keep myself alive by writing." So, then; writing, we must understand was, for SK, a key survival strategy.

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**MRG**

## About this Work

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Since 2001, our Conscience Project meetings have regularly included lively discussions and applications of the conceptual framework of conscience theory - stages, domains and bedrock/intrinsic values – to the ideas we are studying in ethics, neuroscience, education, philosophy, psychology and theology. Early on, Dr. Barbara Stilwell compiled an alphabetical list of authors who may or may not have been explicit about conscience, but who deeply influenced our theory of conscience as it evolved, and recently, we have begun to apply the same conscience-sensitive approaches to character/author analyses in the histories, biographies, and other literature, fact and fiction, we are reading. We are excited to see how these unique conscience-sensitive approaches can enrich our own writing and teaching in humanistic medicine, general humanities, and specifically, moral education. The brief entries in this **Encyclopedia of Conscience** are not meant to be full biographies, but rather to provide an imaginative sketch of the form and function of each subject's conscience. We welcome ideas and additions.



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